

Down by the Docks

written by Calle Dybedahl

For the SF crossover ficathon. Kara Thrace from the 2003 *Battlestar Galactica* miniseries and Inara Serra from *Firefly* was asked for.

Featured fandoms: firefly, bg

Featured pairings: Inara/Starbuck

A.S.S Story codes: ff

Story rating: PG13

In a greasy dive down by the space docks, Inara Serra sat down heavily on a bar stool and ordered whisky, straight up. The moment the bartender put the none too clean glass in front of her, she drank it down.

"Another," she said. "And keep them coming until I've had enough."

The bartender didn't ask her to define enough.

"Rough day?" the woman on the stool next to her asked. She was tall and muscular, dressed in white wifebeater, camo-pattern fatigue pants and combat boots. There was an unlit cigar wedged behind her ear. Her hair was about as long as Inara's was thick, and she fit the greasy dive's ambience far, far better than Inara did. Her name was Kara Thrace and her call sign was Starbuck, for reasons she always refused to explain.

"Like you wouldn't believe," Inara said. "Some days I think the House Priestess is deliberately trying to get me to drop out."

"Well, she's supposed to train you to be the best of the best," Kara said. "That doesn't come easy."

"I know," Inara said. "But that doesn't make me like it any better."

She gulped down another glass of amber-colored liquid.

"It's not so much the classes in themselves," she went on, "but how the House Priestess has assigned them to me."

Kara looked at her with an ever-so-faint amused smile on her lips. A pint of nearly black stout stood mostly untouched on the bar in front of her.

"Oh?" she said. "How's that?"

"For example," Inara said. "This morning, I had three hours of swordfighting."

"Swordfighting!" Kara said. "Why the hell are you studying *that*?"

"Don't ask me," Inara said. "It's in the curriculum. And I'm pretty good at it, so I don't mind. But the thing is, immediately after those three hours of swinging three feet of iron about I have dulcimer class."

She emptied her just refilled glass and looked up at Kara.

"Have you seen a dulcimer?" she said.

Kara shook her head.

"It's a hollow trapezoidal box, about this big," Inara said, indicating something about the size of a dinner tray with her hands. "It's got strings all over it, and you play it by taking two small wooden hammers and hitting the right strings in the right spots with the right amounts of force at exactly the right times. It's tricky at the best of times, and absolutely *awful* when your arms are shaking from long and vigorous exertion."

Again, the contents of the whisky glass made its way down Inara's throat.

"She hates me," Inara said. "She really does."

"On the other hand," Kara said, "if you can play it well like that you're *really* going to be able to play it when you're rested."

Inara put the glass down, hard, so some of the contents spilled out.

"Are you taking her side?" she said. "Because if you are I'll have to take a pool cue from over there and demonstrate some swordfighting moves on your head."

"Oh no, no, no," Kara said. "Of course not."

"Good," Inara said. She emptied the glass, a little slower than the previous few. "I don't really feel like fighting tonight."

Kara sipped at her beer. "So, what are you planning to do tonight?"

Inara looked on while the bartender filled her glass.

"I'm planning to drink steadily until I throw up or pass out, whichever comes first, and then I will rely on you to get me home."

"Fair enough," Kara said. "Cheers."

The greasy dive lay at the corner of two unremarkable streets, one going past space docks three to five, the other past twelve to fourteen. It had windows, but they hadn't been cleaned for so long that they might as well have been walls. The kind of people who went there rarely wanted light anyway. Inside, the place offered large portions of simple food, very cheap booze and a see nothing hear nothing say nothing attitude to what went on among the clientele.

So when Kara Thrace came storming in through the doors, trailing cigar smoke and curses, nobody even looked up. She sat down at the bar and waved towards the bartender.

"Vodka," she said. "Just give me the bottle and a straw."

The bartender put an unlabeled bottle full of clear liquid in front of her and gave her a handful of straws.

"I asked for *a* straw," she said, but the bartender had already walked away.

"Rough day?" Inara asked from the stool next to Kara's.

Inara Serra was neither tall nor short, and she was blessed with the face of an angel and a body to die for. Her black hair fell long and silky down her back, and a shiny blood-red dress hid her charms in that way that made them impossible not to notice. She was sipping at something cloudy and green in a cocktail glass.

"Like you wouldn't believe," Kara said. "Some days I think that the lieutenant is deliberately trying to get me to drop out."

"Well, he's supposed to train you to be the best of the best," Inara said. "That doesn't come easy."

"I know," Kara said. "That doesn't make me like it any better."

She stuck a straw down the bottle and sucked at it. The level in the bottle sank noticeably.

"It's like he's doing his damndest to make it as hard as possible for me just because I'm better than any of the others," she said.

Inara raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, really?" she said.

"Just take today," Kara said. "We were going to fly a timed close-body exercise. Which means that you're to fly your fighter as fast as you can around some kind of object and never have more than four meters between the object and the fighter."

She tried to drink from the straw again, but only sucked air. Frowning, she took the straw out of the bottle, and saw that it had partly dissolved. She shrugged, threw the straw away and put another one in.

"So I was in my fighter waiting for launch," she said when she'd lowered the liquid level a bit further. "The word comes from control clearing me, and then just as I feel the catapult kicking my ship in the arse there's the lieutenant's voice over the radio saying that there's a little surprise for me. And then all my instruments go blank."

"I take it that's not good," Inara said. "Not that I know much about flying. We don't get those classes until next year."

"It's not good," Kara confirmed. "Really not good. Any sensible pilot would've terminated the exercise and gone in for repairs."

Inara drank a little from her cocktail.

"But not you," she guessed.

"Hell no," Kara said. "That's what he wanted me to do, so I just couldn't. I locked the throttle on full and ran by visual only. I haven't been that scared in years. By the end of the course I think I was sweating pure adrenaline."

She tossed another half-dissolved straw and, rather than put in another one, drank straight from the bottle.

"So how did you do?" Inara asked.

"I won, of course," Kara said. "At constant full throttle, the only options were that and crashing."

Inara was about to congratulate her, but the look on Kara's face made her change her mind.

"So what are you going to do now?" she said instead.

Kara sighed.

"I'm going to drink until I'm calm enough to sleep or until I pass out, whichever comes first," she said. "And then I'm going to rely on you to get me home and into bed."

Inara smiled at her. "Certainly," she said.

Inara couldn't remember how they first met. It was almost certainly right there in the bar, both of them trying their best to drown the day's hardships in ethanol. They'd both been coming there regularly, and gradually they'd become aware of each other's presence. Well, of course everybody had been aware of Inara since she first set foot in the place. She had that kind of beauty. But it had taken some time for her to notice Kara.

If asked, she couldn't have said what made her notice. It wasn't that Kara was particularly pretty, and certainly not that she behaved appreciably better than the other soldiers in the bar, because she didn't. If anything, Kara went to some lengths behave *worse* than her comrades in arms.

And maybe that was it.

Like Inara, it was important to her to be the best. The singular one. The one that stood out.

The nail that got pounded down.

Inara remembered the first time they talked. It had been one of the first times the House Priestess really laid into her, really went out of her way to make Inara's day as miserable as possible. When the day finally ended, Inara had felt a great need for chemical relaxation, so she'd headed down to a bar no other Companion apprentice would go to and started drinking down one fluorescent green cocktail after another.

"That's no way to seriously drink," Kara had said, out of the blue.

Inara had looked up from her glass and down the bar to where the soldier woman sat.

"Oh?" Inara had said. "And why not?"

"Too much sugar and fat and crap," Kara said. "Gives your metabolism more things to do than put alcohol in your bloodstream."

It made a certain amount of sense.

"So what do you suggest?"

"Hard liquor, of course. Personally, I prefer vodka. Just ethanol and water, no frills, no distractions. But if you need a bit more taste, whisky or gin will do."

Inara ordered one of each and drank them down in quick succession. She liked the whisky best, so from then on she stuck to that when she just wanted to get drunk as fast as possible.

"So what are you?" Kara eventually asked.

"What do you mean what am I?" Inara replied.

They were sitting next to each other at the bar. For once, neither of them was drinking seriously, which meant that Inara kept to her variously colored cocktails and Kara to equally various beers.

"You're not a soldier," Kara said. "You're not a dock worker, or a technician, or a commercial pilot, or anything else that requires physical labor. You're something upscale, but not so upscale that you can't feel at home in a place like this. So what are you?"

"I'm a Companion," Inara said. "Or, rather, I will be once my apprenticeship is over."

Kara looked more surprised than Inara thought the revelation warranted.

"No shit?" she said. "So if I were to, like, make a pass at you, that'd cost me a small fortune?"

Inara looked at her over her glass, at the moment filled with something that was red at the top and faded to yellow at the bottom.

"First, since I'm only an apprentice, my fees are quite modest," she said. "Second, there would be no cost without negotiation and agreement on a contract. Third, I don't take female clients."

She hardly needed her training in body language to see how her last few words disappointed Kara.

"Because," she went on, "you know what they say. Never mix business and pleasure."

Kara abruptly looked up again. A huge grin spread over her face.

"So, Apprentice Companion Inara Serra," Kara said. "What do you think of mutodog racing?"

"I don't know," Inara said. "I've never been to such a race."

"Wanna?" Kara said.

Inara smiled and emptied her glass.

"Of course flying is harder," Kara said. "I'm rushing forward at speeds that are way, way faster than anything in the natural human environment. Learning to handle that takes a particular talent that not everyone has."

It was one of the rare nights when they were both hitting the hard liquor, and they had retreated to one of the booths at the back of the dive when sitting on stools got too unsteady.

"You're wrong," Inara said. "Your ship was designed and built to be used by humans. It's got all sorts of ingenious controls and instruments and stuff to help you cope. People have no such luxuries. People are strange, fickle, obtuse, dishonest, neurotic and most

of all *different*. Learning to handle them, and to handle them anywhere near *well* is much harder than learning to handle any kind of machine. If nothing else, at least machines are predictable."

Kara emptied her vodka glass. "Tell you what," she said. "We go over to my shuttle. Right now. I show you how to fly, and teach you the basics. After that, you can make up your mind which is harder."

"Don't I get a shot at teaching you?" Inara said. "Or showing you my own specialty?"

"There'll only be us in the shuttle," Kara said.

"Yes?" Inara asked, and just as she'd expected she saw a mild blush creep up Kara's face.

"Well, if it's all right with you, then," Kara said. "Let's go."

They left the bar unsteady on their feet, but the fresh air and the minor exertion of the walk over to the spaceport seemed to drain the alcohol from them, and when they reached Kara's shuttle they were both feeling almost sober. The shuttle itself was a small old thing, capable of lifting eight people or so into orbit and with life support for the same eight people for a week. Maybe two if they took care not to breathe too much.

Kara slid into the main pilot's seat and gestured towards the copilot seat next to it.

"Strap yourself in," she said. "Takeoff's going to be a bit rough since this thing doesn't have any gravity compensators."

"See?" Inara said while she sat down and fastened her harness. "That's what I meant when I said that about technology helping you."

"We wouldn't fly far without *some* help," Kara said. She reach out and flipped a switch, which made half the panels in front of her go dark.

"But if you want unassisted, we can do unassisted," she continued.

"What did you just turn off?" Inara said, suddenly not so sure this was a good idea.

"Guidance computers," Kara said. "Now it's all my skill, baby!"

The shuttle shot towards space, with only the occasional wobble as Kara hiccuped.

The shuttle drifted through the blackness, apparently motionless but for a slow and steady roll. After a little while, blue-glowing plasma shot out from a number of strategically placed nozzles. The shuttle's rotation slowed, stopped and turned into an even slower rotation in the other direction.

Inside the shuttle, Inara used language highly unbecoming for a Companion. She was sitting in the main pilot's seat, with her hands on the manual attitude controls.

Kara laughed. "I told you it wasn't easy," she said. "To be honest, you're doing a lot better than I thought you would. It takes most students days to learn to handle the controls well enough to entirely counter motion."

Inara very, very lightly touched the attitude control and managed to slow down the rotation enough that it took several seconds to notice that it wasn't actually entirely still.

"So how long did it take you to learn?" she asked.

"Me?" Kara said. "I got it right at the first try."

She was floating in the air behind the pilot's seat, holding her place in the microgravity by keeping a hand on Inara's shoulder.

Inara looked disbelievingly over her shoulder at her.

"It's true," Kara said. "It was also blind luck, but I usually don't admit that. Now let me back in my seat, we have to maneuver a little to get where we're going."

Inara unbuckled and floated away from the seat.

"We're actually going somewhere?" she said. "All I can see is stars, and those I know are too far away for this ship."

Inara let her hand run along Kara's leg as she descended into the seat and buckled up.

"We are," Kara said. "I want to show you something."

They coasted silently through the darkness, and gradually Inara realized that several brighter points that she'd thought were stars were getting larger. As they got closer, they grew into dark irregular shapes, slowly tumbling in the vacuum. Kara nudged the controls, and with the whining of the attitude jets came acceleration. Their approach towards the shapes slowed.

"Is this it?" Inara said. "A few rocks in space?"

Uncharacteristically, Kara stayed silent.

"I mean, it may be a change from all the black, but as sights go..."

Inara fell silent.

The shuttle had moved the last little bit so the solar system's distant sun was right behind the irregular shapes, and suddenly they all seemed to explode into light. The weak, rare rays of sunlight travelled and broke through the objects, throwing multitudes of prismatic rainbows and moving spots of pure light all through the shuttle's interior. To Inara, it looked like the blackness of space had erupted into a cosmic fireworks display the likes of which she had never even imagined, a display that moved and changed as the objects tumbled and moved.

"They're ice fragments," Kara said. "Unusually clear ones. We had a live fire exercise out here a couple of months ago, and used an old ice asteroid as a target. On the way back, I happened to fly past just the section where the sun's light breaks through the ice."

Inara pulled herself around the pilot's seat, so she hovered over Kara's lap. She lightly kissed her, holding on to the armrests to prevent herself from floating away and making sure to *almost* touch Kara's breasts while she reached to hold on.

"Thank you," she said. "It's wonderful. I had no idea something like this could be out here."

"You're welcome," Kara whispered, her breath mingling with Inara's.

Inara hit the release on the harness holding Kara to the seat. She ran her fingers along Kara's bare arms, seeing goose bumps rise where her fingertips passed.

"My turn now," she said.

The greasy dive down by the space docks never closed. People came and went at all hours. Some because they worked whenever a ship came to the docks, which, given that starships ran to their own schedules, could be any time at all. Some had that kind of business that is best done in darkness, and came to the bar to get the courage to do what they had to do.

And some came there because they could not bear to part, and in spite of knowing that they both had to return to their dormitories they kept delaying the inevitable. Cocktails and beer and whisky and vodka had given way to coffee and other things to help them

stay awake as they sat there, close together, touching. They sat in silence, for with words comes language, and with language comes thinking, and with thinking the daytime world comes back. So they savored every moment, remembering fractured starlight and weightless caresses. There would be other nights, of course, but for those to come this one had to end. And who wants perfection to cease?

Outside the grimy windows, the sun slowly rose, giving birth to a new day.